

AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE COALITION THAT UNITED PHILADELPHIA TO CHALLENGE THE LOGIC OF AUSTERITY, PROTECT PUBLIC GOODS AND SAVE ELEVEN BRANCH LIBRARIES, AS WELL AS A SERIES OF REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COMMONS, THE ENDURING LEGACY OF MOVEMENT VICTORIES AND THE ONGOING STRUGGLES TO PROTECT AND EXPAND ACCESS TO NON-COMMERCIALIZED PUBLIC SPACE, ACCOMPANIED BY A SERIES OF FREELY REPRODUCIBLE CUT PAPER GRAPHICS BY ERIK RUIN



IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE-

In 2008-9, **BEN REMSEN** was in library school and lived a few blocks from the Kingsessing Library. Presently he is a librarian for the Free Library, as well as a shop steward in AFSCME DC47 Local 218

KRISTIN CAMPBELL is a Co-Founder of the Coalition to Save the Libraries, which is how she cut her teeth as a community organizer 15 years ago. With a focus on building the power and unity of multi-racial working class communities, Kristin coordinates campaign research and strategy processes, directs outreach and field efforts, designs leadership development programs, and offers strategic guidance to community and labor organizations to increase their effectiveness and strength of purpose.

GREGORY BENJAMIN was a leader in the Coalition to Save the Libraries. He is the founder/chairman of the Kingsessing Fifth Division Community of Neighbors community organization, a committeeman in the 5th Division of the 51st Ward, and a volunteer member of the Board of Directors at the Southwest CDC.

KATRINA CLARK was a member of the multiracial Coalition to Save the Libraries in 2008. She is a veteran teacher and Reading Specialist.

BETTY BEAUFORT is President of the Friends Group of Queen Memorial Library, beginning when Mayor Nutter wanted to close 11 libraries and still active. She was honored on February 2, 2023 by Councilwoman Brooks in City Council.

IRV ACKLESBERG was lead counsel in the case against the Nutter Administration, served as president of the Friends of the Free Library, and now continues his consumer protection work as a lawyer and is active in his Germantown community.

KATE GOODMAN is a librarian and proud member of District Council DC 47 Local 187, the union for city workers. She is also a Marxist and an active member of Socialist Alternative. Before becoming a librarian, she was a union and community organizer for 15 years.

EMILY DRABINSKI is a librarian at the City University of New York and incoming president of the American Library Association.

Interviews, editing and papercut illustrations by **ERIK RUIN**, who learned art history on the third floor of the Detroit Public Library and is now a working artist residing in West Philly for the past 15 or so years.

All images within this publication are free to reproduce under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs CC BY-NC-ND Creative Commons License- meaning they can be freely used with attribution, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes.

Downloadable digital images can be accessed at justseeds.org/graphics

For all inquiries, contact erikruin@gmail.com

This publication was created as a part of **The People's Budget Office**, a public art installation produced by artist Phoebe Bachman with Mural Arts Philadelphia. Contributing artists include Blanche Brown, Root Catalyst, Pamela Chuang, Josh Graupera, Oscar Gresh, Maria Möller, Sam Rise, Arshayla Robinson, and Erik Ruin. The project is created in partnership with the City of Philadelphia Budget Office, Philadelphia Revenue Project, Councilmember Kendra Brook's Office, LOVE Park, Philadelphia Parks and Recreation, and highlighting the platform of Alliance for a Just Philadelphia.



Many thanks to all those interviewed for their invaluable feedback and helping thread the connections to one another, to Jen Kinney and Victoria Ahmadizadeh Melendez for their advice, and to Phoebe Bachman and Blanche Brown for their crucial connective labor.



A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE COALITION TO SAVE THE LIBRARIES

1. THE PEOPLE AND THE LIBRARY

Ben Remsen (BR)- It was mid fall that there was that announcement. They were going to close 11 branches. There's going to be significant budget cuts... a general austerity budget went through under Nutter, with Siobhan Reardon as our [library] director. My impression is that she had been brought in based on her experience downsizing a library system in Westchester, New York. Suggesting that was like the plan all along- you know, just kind of classic shock doctrine kind of thesis applies here. "Oh, good. Now we have a crisis. You know, we can do the thing we want to do all along cutting services."

Kristin Campbell (KCA)- It was an economically volatile time for us in Philadelphia, for cities and towns across the country, and also globally. We were in a global economic crisis.

Gregory Benjamin (GB)- I'll never forget, I was on Springfield avenue cleaning the block- that's how clear it is- Mike and Wilder they were coming up they said, "Brother Ben". I said, "Hey, how y'all doing?" Verbatim. They were talking about, "Did you hear about the library?" and I'm like "Library?". And they said, "Well, you know, the city is talking about closing down the library." I said, "They can't close down the library." They said "Well that's what they talking about doing." So right then I told them, I said, "Well, I'm gonna get the community together and we're going to start doing something." Now we didn't have the total breakdown or the total vision of how it was- this thing began to evolve as the process started. But that led to, for example, the demonstrations.

November 15th, we were out there at Kingsessing. First demonstration we had about 100- 120 people right in front of that library over here. That was very uncommon for this area at that time. Elected officials were just like super surprised. They thought we was just gonna have like 8 or 9 people out there just making some noise. And it was cold. So we say, well, you know what? We'll prove it wasn't a fluke and we're gonna do it again next week. And that's what we did.

Katrina Clark (KCL)- I was teaching third and fourth grade at Montessori Genesis II. It was a very tiny elementary school, smaller than the name. And we were so small we did not have our own library, but our students were avid, avid readers. And we went to the library between one and two times a week. We were at 36th and Haverford, and our closest library was the Mantua branch at 34th and Haverford. So we're talking about two blocks. For students who you know, it was a joy, a delight, it was a reward to go to the library to lose the library was unimaginable, completely unimaginable, because I had students who had already read every book, and I had hundreds of books in the class but they'd read through everything, either before they got into my

Facebook that they've become estranged from for some reason. Yeah. So it's like all kinds of things.

And I think it's important to provide different types of learning- so like not only like book-based literacy, but create spaces for people to just talk to each other. This library has a huge role to play in preserving the Black political memory of political and cultural memory of the neighborhood. This is a really important place where there were tons of jazz clubs, it was called the Golden Strip. It was named after Cecil B Moore. When you actually talk to people, they worked with Cecil B Moore. They have all these memories to share about like the Black Panthers and things like that. Dox Thrash lived next door. So we're trying to move towards making it a place to display all those things on a permanent or rotating basis. So people can come see, like make art, see art, celebrate history, share with each other what they already know. It's not like a didactic place where we just, like, teach people, like "read a book". It's like creating democratic grassroots conversation and learning.

KCA- I just feel like, this is what a lot of us said at the time was that a public library is a community good that is in service to working class people's educational development, and is really in service to people's transformation as agents of society, political actors. We cannot afford to diminish those opportunities. We have to actually be growing them as much as possible. So, I think the role of a library is to be a community convening hub for people to grow together, to transform together, to take ownership for their neighborhoods, and to build more genuine solidarity at the community level.

BB- It's a haven where you can come and have your peace of mind. Like I say, just sit there and read a book. Or just sit there and whatever you want to do. But you in your own space. You can't get your own space nowhere other than your house. But the library you can. To me, the library is a soothing mechanism. You can come. You can do what you want to do. You can sit down and write. You know, it's so much you can do here because it's all about your mind. You can chill out, the children, you can chill out in the library. There's so much you can do in the library. So much. So much. And it's got to come back to that because it's too noisy out there in that world. It's too noisy out there. You've got to come in and collect your thoughts and have your peace of mind. We can be our own people, our own person

It's like, no, these things are not free. Like we buy all these books. So people sometimes get confused when they say like, why are the books on hold or something? And I'm like, because we buy them. We're buying them with the budget. Or they think that library is just kept open with volunteers or something like that. It's like there's a bunch of people who are trained and experienced. Their training and experience are filtered towards ideally, if it works well, at least creating a space that's just like whatever people want out of it, or more or less, hopefully.

Like if you're running a DIY venue, even if you're having shows at your house and you're like, "I'm just doing it because I love it. I don't care. I'm not taking any money". You're still kind of like "could you throw me a little money for toilet paper or something", you know, it's like, no, we have a toilet paper budget. Like, we're already getting that. There is a budget. It's just that budget is something that is collectively supported, based on the idea that we've socially decided that this is a space that we should have, which as plenty of people before me I've observed is like impossible. I mean, it's like public schools or something, if they didn't already exist, it would be like impossible to get that kind of thing passed through Congress or whatever, because people would be like, why would you need that? You know? But I think we have the good fortune as a field of having this incredible snowball of good faith, of respect and love for the institution. So that does create conditions to keep it, you know, relatively funded. We always have problems. But compared to plenty of things, we're like actually, I mean, we do have staff and everything.

KG- I came to the library, I think, from a different background than a lot of other people. So I see it as a source of community power and engagement, and the physical space. It is like one of the only remaining true community centers that exists, at least in the neighborhoods that I work in. You can't sit even in the Dunkin Donuts. They took all the tables out before the pandemic. So there's nowhere to go. Especially in low income neighborhoods where there's no incentive for for profit businesses to be operating. This is a public resource and a public space. A lot of people right now are coming here because they live in shelters and they get kicked out and a lot of people have families. But also like something I've learned is like people really just want to have fun. So I've learned a lot about doing like screen printing and gardening and like I'm, I become a way more fun person by working at the library. Like I learned how to do perler beads. And build relationships. So we've really tried to shift the other side of the library towards like reading nooks and things like that because people just don't have a place to go and chill. I think the library is really liberating because there's nothing I need to get someone to do in here.

We have this big play space that was built a while ago. So I try to encourage the kids to, like, run around without running, as much as possible. Or just like come and do self-guided learning. And then people use computers to mostly look for jobs or to go on Facebook. There's one library at sixth and Girard that's near a lot of residential rehab centers. So people come there as their day trip, get library cards, use the computer and like even connect with people on

class or during the class. We had the students for two years at a time, so we really needed access to both reading books, but also we did a lot of research, even though we were only up through fourth grade.

We started meeting with folks connected to the Mantua branches. Everybody was doing [that] at that moment, right? The immediate reaction was, what do we do to save our branch?

Betty Beaufort (BB)- It started with me in 2008 when Nutter wanted to close eleven libraries, and Queen Memorial was one of the libraries. I really wasn't too involved with the library until then. I mean, I know about the library, but I wasn't like I am now. You know, once I became a part of it, it became part of me. And I was not going to see the library go down as long as we could help.

It started out organic right here in front of the library out there. We had I guess about 20 some people. I had a preacher there, a pastor from Tasker Street Baptist Church, because I believe in prayer. So he was there to pray. And we rallied. Matter of fact several times we rallied out there.

That's how it started, in front of our own libraries. But then it got so much and we kept on going. We had to get bigger. We had to take it outside of our library.

KCA- I was working at the Friends of the Free Library, and I was pretty excited even before the budget cuts were announced of what was being built at the community level through the Friends of the Free Library groups. It really did seem like there were everyday Philadelphians, that were really committed to their libraries, that wanted to take on greater ownership and community involvement in the libraries through these Friends of the Free Library branches. I had recently graduated from college, like I said, and I had become a student organizer at NYU. I already thought of myself as being part of social movements in general and was trying to figure out how to become a community organizer in my hometown of Philadelphia. So I was kind of captivated by the Friends of the Free Library Network and was thinking about, you know, where were bases of people and places that some community organizing could really emerge. And so being situated in this job, I came to see libraries as community hubs – they are community institutions. They are publicly funded and publicly run. They're open and free spaces. And when thinking about community organizing, you're often thinking of like, where do people come organically to converge at the neighborhood level? So I was happy to have that job because I was in those questions at the time as a pretty young person myself.

I remember saying, "I'm at the Friends of the Free Library. All of this stuff is popping off around these closures that have been announced. We could potentially play a role in coordinating and calling meetings, doing outreach and recruitment. I think what really needs to happen is people from all of the 11 branches need to come together to strategize and create a campaign and figure out the strategy and tactics that would work to keep these library

closures from happening. What would a campaign plan look like to actually fight to stop these closures altogether?"

GB- Well, the Coalition came about when other groups began to see that they had the same traction as far as the interest is concerned in their area. For example, like, out in Kensington and in other areas of the city, they began to reach out. You know, people started reaching out and saying, "Hey, look, Brother Benjamin, can we all meet?" You know, and the coalition came about as a result. Because at that time I think it was like there was two libraries that really didn't have a strong support system, but we included everybody, all the libraries that there was an effort to close. We all just band together and just looked out for everybody. And it just began to mushroom.

KCL- We met a lot at the church at 22nd and Chestnut, I'm pretty sure it was the Unitarian church. That's when we really started. We realized that this is a city wide issue because there were so many people in the city whose branch was not affected, who were completely against the decision. And so this allowed people to be able to tap in who were not you know, they weren't in the Mantua section, they weren't in the Eastwick section. These city wide meetings allowed people to come in who weren't necessarily connected to a particular branch that was closing. And they were growing very quickly.

BB- Every week we were doing something because we thought it was terrible for them to close up libraries and most of them was in black neighborhoods. They use Chestnut Hill in that eleven library list. That's a joke. You know Chestnut Hill ain't striving for nothing. Everybody saw that was a joke.

KCA- At the same time, Sherrie Cohen, her neighborhood branch that was the namesake of her father, was also on the closure list, and she is an attorney. I believe her and Irv Ackelsberg teamed up to take a legal approach where they filed for a legal injunction that said that this was actually unlawful, that the mayor could not move forward with a closure plan of public goods like this without city council approval. So Sherrie was then a part of the coalition, and we basically called together all of the community members of the 11 libraries that were already organized to some extent through their Friends Of groups. We decided that we were going to take a two pronged approach – that we were going to definitely support, organize, and rally around the legal injunction. But we were also going to prepare to do more action-oriented community organizing type things in the event that the legal approach was not successful.

Irv Ackelsberg (IA)- Initially, when the coalition approached me, I was very skeptical. It's like, you know, it's just a budget decision. How is that a lawsuit? Well what we found was that a number of years earlier, then-city council member David Cohen, had been very upset about the mayor at the time closing a firehouse. I think it was on Germantown Avenue in Nicetown, near Temple Hospital. And the firehouse was closed and the people were very upset. Cohen was upset to the point where he got an ordinance passed that said that basically the only way that capital assets, buildings, can be sold or

users. But what that information is, is obviously changing a lot. But libraries have always like transformed in response to changing ways that information is gathered. I see it also as like one of the circulating machines in society. So you've got- what do you have? You have the library, which checks books in and out. So we have a highly developed system for sharing resources. I think about interlibrary loan as like this, you know, magical system that you can't believe exists where you can, if you want a book from Germany, we can get you a book from Germany, like we're all partnered to make that happen. It's us and the post office. And so if you think of the two institutions that are getting the heaviest, some of the heaviest attacks during the Trump regime and what came after is the post office. The structures that circulate goods, public goods to people. So I think the library serves that circulation function for places and becomes a site where you could put a lot of stuff- diaper banks, blood drives, you know, you used to get your tax forms printed out. Now the shift to totally electronic government means that you've got to come in and use our computer. It's the circulation of goods and services that I think is really crucial in the library.

You can go to the bathroom there and I live in New York City and there's nowhere else to go to the bathroom. Without buying a cup of coffee, you know, and even if you buy a cup of coffee, they may not let you use the bathroom unless you look right. But in the library, you can just like, walk in and use the bathroom. You can get a drink of water. When it's hot, you can go inside. And every community has one. Like I just landed in Chicago. If I wanted to go get a drink of water, use the Wi-Fi, all I would have to do is find a library, and go in. Knowing that that's like a guaranteed public resource and public space, I mean, you understand why they want to take it away. You know, they want to privatize every inch of the city, which would mean getting rid of the public library.

BR- There's not a lot of spaces where you don't have to buy anything, and you can just be there, as long as you follow certain basic ground rules, for as long as you want. And also where we can, you know, provide public programming and community programming. Community groups can come in and do stuff, use the space just like a free rental space. Free for its own sake is good because that makes it more accessible, but also I think there's like an ideological thing that goes along with that where you're not coming up with your program because you think it's going to be the thing that's going to grow- like, you know, the kind of capitalist shark thing, like it's just like going to make more of whatever the thing it is. You came up with it based on a different rubric, based on it seeming useful or interesting or whatever. Almost every other aspect of our society exists for the purpose of turning money into more money. So yeah, that's really nice. And then also I guess the other thing, again kind of obvious, but just like the collective ownership of resources, you know, it's like not something people are super used to. One of my favorite little lines that I made up, whenever I encourage someone to get a library card if they don't have one, is rather than saying it's free, I'll say, "Well, actually you pay for it already with your taxes."

WHAT IS A LIBRARY FOR? (A ROUNDTABLE)

BR- Libraries are marketed as, or thought of as like where you get books and to a lesser extent movies and maybe CDs, you know, and and so there's this thing that is in the air, this this narrative of like, do people even go to libraries anymore? What's the point of libraries? There's no reason, you know, we've got Google and Netflix, etc. And that narrative has been going on for a while, you know, at least 15 years or something like that. All that stuff is oversold because you can't actually get everything on the internet the same way. And there's value in having someone guide you to something or recommend books or whatever.

It's often like not the most sexy thing we do, but helping people on the computer up there is just like a huge, huge aspect (of work as a librarian). It's like really the most boring thing, but like the single most common tech question that's like a crisis and like I'm solving the crisis is "I can't get into my email because I don't know my password." If I can get them into their email and then the thing that they needed to do, which might literally be what connects them to a benefit or a job or something becomes possible in a way that it didn't become possible before because they literally just don't know how to get into their email and or like they don't know how to use a web browser anymore because there's actually, I mean, an interesting digital divide thing that I'm sure other people must have commented on, but plenty of times, because of the prevalence of phones, there's tons of people who do know how to use the Internet, but only in a very specific way.

KCL- Here's the thing right, like the librarian has their job title and their job description, but the librarian, just like a teacher, is doing way more than that. I seriously doubt it's in their job description to help somebody decide what goes on the resume. And I'm sure that every single day in Philadelphia, somebody is helping someone make a decision about, you know, "oh, let me proofread that for you. I suggest you take that off. What about this? You never talk about this experience. But you know, because we have a relationship. I know that you did that." It's about safe places for young people to go. Which we felt very strongly during the pandemic, when libraries were closed.

GB- The library's the one place anybody and everybody can go. It's a place that they can get knowledge, sometimes a place they can wash. Sometimes it's a place that they can just get some rest. You know, for our children and their parents, in these areas that have a lot of poverty- there was a school that was two blocks away that depended on [Kingsessing library], another school that was dependent on it. There's senior citizens that can't go far, but a lot of them can make it in there. Yeah. So you know it's a place that provides a service for everybody in the community regardless.

ED- I still love the library for the books, you know? You know, I'm a traditionalist, actually. Like, I think the library is meant to select, acquire, describe, circulate and preserve information on behalf of a community of

shut down or retired is with, you know, basically a bill passed by council. So you actually need an ordinance. The mayor lacks the power, under the city code, to unilaterally close a facility just because he wants to or because he feels like he has to for budget reasons. You actually have to go to council.

So once I had that in hand, it felt to me like- you know, it's hard to explain, oh not so hard to explain, it's kind of maybe hard to accept the reality of the legal business. So you might have a law that tells you you win. But you actually need a judge to say you win, to follow that law. So maybe you lose because the judge just doesn't want to do this, or just whatever reasons, without getting inside the head of the judge. The judge denies for whatever reason, so then you gotta go to take it to an appellate court to try to get them to do it. And meanwhile, the libraries are closing.

BR- I attended a- I don't know what it was marketed as- I want to say an information session or something, about the closures at Kingsessing Rec Center in maybe december 2008ish. It was clear it was like there's public feedback time, but this is not us discussing what we're going to do. This is just us telling you this is what's happening and we're going to explain why. And it was Nutter and Reardon and one or two other people sitting on a panel and it was like 100 people in a row just in a line would just be like, "Screw you, you're not going to do that. Actually, you're not going to do that."

KCA- The town halls became recruitment and outreach sites for us as the coalition, we used them to basically sign people up, to recruit them to our meetings. They were raucous events. Hundreds of people were coming out, pouring into these town halls. And I don't even think the mayor himself realized just how unwieldy they would become because people were furious. There was just very organic, raw outrage at the community level.

KCL- So going to one of those [town halls], a couple of my students wrote letters saying how important the library was to them, and then challenging the mayor to walk with us to the next closest library. Because the whole idea, right, Siobhan Rearden had just come in from New York, right? And she says, just go to your next library. You know, well, actually, first thing she said was, just use your school library. And we're like, boo! They closed the school libraries decades ago. We don't have that. There's like four librarians in the whole damn system. Like, get your facts straight before you start talking. And second thing was, go to your closest library. Well, you know, Google Maps existed by then, and we did the math and it was two miles going there. Two miles doesn't sound terrible. Alright, two miles. I'll go to the library, get back. But nobody was counting that it's two times two miles because you had to get home!

This makes a huge difference, right? Like we use the library every single day. You know, there's a reason why people choose the place that they live, the place where their business is for a reason. And now you're just going to take away the resources that made the place, you know, marketable in the first place.

IA- Part of the process involved me essentially putting an order in for the kind of main plaintiffs that we needed, and it was only because the coalition was so well organized and had its tentacles out all over the city and effectively in in most, if not all, of the 11 branches that were to be closed, we were able to just find amazingly beautiful stories to be the vehicles through which this case was presented. So in a lawsuit, you need actually, you know, people with their own stories. And those stories then become what the judge is hearing. And, you know, we're seeking preliminary relief. So basically they have to have good stories. The people that they found were just so beautiful. There was one person I remember who lived on the same block as the Logan Library, which is this beautiful small Carnegie Library [as were] a lot of the ones that were to be closed. They're just beautiful buildings. This particular woman, she bought her house there precisely because it was so close to the library. And she had these two sons. And it was really important to her that her sons have a library to go after school because she just wanted to keep them off the streets. She was also a poet and needed and used the library as it is not just a nice place to work, but a resource because it had a particularly unique collection of black poets. And one of the things I learned was that unlike the library [administration] was saying, well, if you close one branch, people can just go to another branch. Well, not only did that not take into account the fact that, particularly with kids, you can't ask them to just go to other neighborhoods. It sometimes is unsafe for them to travel to other neighborhoods to use the library, particularly at night. But the library's branches are not fungible. They're not all identical. They have collections, which in many cases are targeting a particular piece of the customer base of the library. So this particular branch had this unique collection, which if closed, where's that collection going to go? No one had really thought about that.

KCL- So in that meeting, (my student) Razion Tafari, I think it was him, he challenged Mayor Nutter to walk with us. And it was broadcast. Mayor Nutter said, I'll do it. Publicly. It was like caught by television cameras and everything.

So we planned a huge walk. We get Spiral Q involved. So they're wearing book hats. We have musicians. We have a read-in at the library where we read a book by Patricia Polacco about the importance of libraries. And then we walk the two miles. And so we have the news there. And this is led by third and fourth grade students, right? I mean, we have kids as young as like three years old in this walk. So it gets a lot of press. We do the walk. Mayor Nutter doesn't show up even though he's publicly said that he would. You know, he straight up in children's faces said, "yes, I will support you" and then chose not to support. I thought that was one of the big downfalls. Like, you just made a huge promise. As if we weren't going to follow through. But we absolutely did follow through. And it was very, very big. So that's what we did at Mantua. We had multiple protests, but that was the biggest one.

we're the guys who put a barcode on it and that work is crucial, you can't have a commons where things circulate, where we share things, without somebody understanding how to affix the barcode and where do we get it, we have to buy the barcode— there's all this work that goes into it, which is why I think the library worker is so important because without them, you know, you're not getting anything.

I was talking to a librarian at the Charleston, South Carolina Public Library. And during the pandemic, when the federal government did the emergency rental assistance program— a sign that the state can act to keep you in your home when it wants to, and it could do that all the time. But it did that just because it was an emergency. Right. But in order to apply for it, you had to use the Internet and you had to have an email address. So I don't know if you have any people in your life who don't have an email address, but getting them to get an email address, that is not automatic. You know, they need a person to help them with that. Preferably not a family member who will get frustrated quickly. But who does that work in the world? It's the library worker. So librarians worked one on one with individuals in their communities— hours of time, signing them up for emails, teaching them how to access their emails, helping them fill out the forms, helping them access the information about their benefits, troubleshooting when they got rejected. We are the people who connect the person to the resources. And there's nothing automatic about that connection. And it's the library that makes it happen.

in union work, you know that it can be done. And so many people think it can't be done. They think you can't do anything. They think we're just going to lose. But I totally believe we can win, you know? So let me tell this story for a few months and then I just couldn't believe it when I won. I was just shocked. [My partner] was shocked. She was like, you're never going to win. But it's very cute that you're running. But she was very supportive, you know? But then I won and it was fucking awesome. I'm having a great time. I'm meeting so many people.

I mean, ALA is mostly a professional association. I forget what our slogan is, it's like maximize reading for everyone (The best reading, for the largest number, at the least cost), but mostly it's professional development workshops and stuff. Thinking through how to be librarians and best practices and convening communities to make decisions together. It has a history like any other American institution- deeply racist, deeply misogynist, but also in many cases on the right side of history, even if it takes a little while to get there. So when there were efforts in the South to desegregate public libraries, ALA dragged its feet, dragged its feet, dragged its feet, and then finally expelled chapters that had segregated public libraries. When the Patriot Act was passed, we were the only kind of group that publicly stepped out and said we were against it, which is when I was becoming a librarian. So it was why I joined. I was like, this is an organization that's right most of the time. I'm less interested in transforming ALA-the-organization, and more interested in like, what are the tools that I have for the next year? So I'll be inaugurated on June 27th. What can I do in one year? I have some things- I have a budget. I can travel. The protocol is that the president gets first dibs on media requests. So, for me, to every single question, the answer is that we need reinvestment in public institutions and public goods. That's just \ my answer for everything. And I look forward to being able to say that a lot, because I anticipate we will get a lot of media just because the right is bringing it to us. I think it's important to have a left voice answering the questions.

Library security- I think that's one of the big barriers to access, actually, is the policification of libraries. There's an impulse to beef up security, but it's just the wrong impulse. I feel like a lot of libraries are hardening- and not hardening by fully staffing the library with the people who are necessary to make the space safe to run it well, but hardening it by hiring cops to run it. So I think that's a big accessibility issue.

Access to stuff requires all this infrastructure, you know? Like, one of the things I've learned since taking office as president elect is that we have an extremely robust national system for circulating by mail talking books, recorded books for the blind and visually impaired. I had no idea. But it is robust. It's intense. The most common sort of patron of that sort of national network is a woman in her eighties with macular degeneration. There is all kinds of hidden infrastructure that makes the commons accessible and we are the people who maintain and develop those systems like interlibrary loan. But it's not magic. I mean, it is to me, it's like tubes and wires and stuff, but like, we build that every day and without that, you don't have anything circulating. So,



2. DIFFERENT THREADS

KCA- Through the course of the community organizing process around all of the branches, there were these beautiful community leaders that emerged. At Kingsessing, it was Gregory Benjamin, Betty Beaufort in Point Breeze. The Book Walk was at the Mantua branch because there was a teacher and a principal of a small school, and their students and the teachers utilized that branch library a lot in terms of the school day. And so they self-organized and became the community leaders around that branch.

GB- I got my buddy, he got two speakers. I got him up here, people like noise, you know, and then I circulated, because I had block captains all around here at that time. And we just started working and just different people started coming out- Caucasian people, African-American people. I mean, it was like a smorgasbord of people. And I don't think that they anticipated that that could happen. And then once they seen the outpour of community residents, then the politicians got involved.

KCL- A lot of the people who were really pulling us together were white, were newer to Philadelphia, and a lot of the people who were from a particular branch were, not everybody, but mostly black folk and had lived in the neighborhood. I hadn't lived in the neighborhood for a long time, but for the most part, a lot of black folk had lived in the neighborhood of their branch for, like, their entire lives. And maybe their family had been there for generations. So there was this tension between the people who, very successfully, were pulling everyone together. They were coming from this very organizing background of like "it's not our role to do the work. It's our role to bring the resources together." And I remember making a statement, and I was just like, "your fate is either wrapped up with us or it isn't. You're either part of this or you're not." I was saying that from a place of- I think you are, but like, you can't just stay removed. You have to really be a part of it. Like you are part of our community or you're not. Not in a way of trying to push people away, but saying like, claim it that we are part of the same community.

KCA- There were a couple of tensions that emerged – one was that this was a crisis response campaign. We were not leaning into the infrastructure of any previously existing organization. It was really all very emergent and it was very organic and it was, well, kind of a big tent formation. The Coalition to Save the Libraries was drawing in a lot of people who were concerned for a lot of different reasons. It was a multi-racial coalition. It was a multi-class coalition. There were some organizations and unions involved, but a lot of it was just newly activated individuals. I think that there were tensions to navigate because of that, you know, and that's why we decided to create an advisory board or a leadership council that was really anchored in the people who were directly impacted at the neighborhood level. And we really tried to identify community leaders. So there were questions around who is in the leadership of this because it's such a new and emergent kind of formation. It was a very open coalition – anyone could join. But we anchored it to people on the ground, at the grassroots. And then there was this little collective of

COLLECTIVE POWER, PUBLIC GOOD: Emily Drabinski, president-elect of the American Library Association

Emily Drabinski (ED)- I worked for a long time at Long Island University, Brooklyn, which is the first private higher ed union in the country and one of the last ones. There were some Supreme Court decisions that limited higher ed unions at private colleges and universities. But it was always a radical union, always on strike. And so I joined the faculty there, in the library. Two years later, I was on strike. We ended up with a contract that I was like, "Why did we go on strike? That wasn't worth it." I'm just somebody when it's when somebody fucks with me, I'm like, "Fuck you." So, we end up out of the strike and our president at the time used union dues to buy a giant sandwich for the campus to thank them for their support of the workers during the strike. And I was like, I'm not in this for the fucking sandwich -that he management gets to eat with us! I'm not into it. So I ran for executive board. I was the secretary of the Union and then we were locked out. I've been in higher ed forever- I don't know anybody who's been locked out. I didn't think that could happen to me. But that was an extremely radicalizing experience. So if you were on the receiving end of management power that, like, wants to eliminate you, like they cut all of our salaries, all of our health insurance was canceled, like on Labor Day. I had cancer a couple of years after that. Had I had cancer then? I might not be here. They don't care if you live or die. It's all about power for them and maintaining management control. And so I was just like, "that is messed up." We were out for 12 days and in those 12 days I learned so much about how to organize to fight back against that kind of thing. So how to organize collectively. just basic union organizing shit, like how to make a list and how to do assessments and how to think about demands. And then we continued negotiating a contract and start organizing around a contract campaign for the year. So it's all I did with my time. I was just like super involved. And then I left that job, thankfully, and went to CUNY. So now I'm working in a public institution which aligns with my values.

And COVID hits. Everything sort of is horrible. And then, I don't know. I don't know what made me run (for president of the American Library Association). I was just sitting in my office and I was like, "We need somebody in this position who can be louder." And I'm just really loud. And I've been through union stuff, so, like, there's nothing you can do to hurt me. The right wing media's mad about me, but I don't care. And then I ran real hard because I was like, there's no way I'm going to win, you know, ever, because the people who win are the managers and the people who can afford to pay dues are managers. So I'm not going to win, but let me use my time on the trail. My campaign slogan was "collective power, public good." I was like, let me just say that as many times in as many places as I possibly can, and I won't get elected, but at least I will have spent a few months telling the story that I think we need to hear more, which is that it is possible to build towards collective action that can make meaningful change in the world. And if you've done that, which I have

Saturday day instead of a Monday. And then you're going to suck staff out of there and then there's going to be more rolling closures." So we were like "do overtime to open Saturdays at these ten branches," which is working well. And so now we're looking at the schedule for the fall and trying to figure out what models work for that.

Yeah, but really like our administration can't do it. Our workers know how it can work. And so we're shifting the dynamic between our management dictating what to do, and negotiating our own proposals. I don't think we had the power to do that a few years ago either. I'm able to watch that from a perspective of a union steward. We haven't seen budget increases on a mass scale in other departments. Like even Parks and Rec is way bigger than us, they have like 200 facilities and they got a small bump. A lot went to FDR Park for that freaking mess. But we've gotten a \$30 million bump, which is proportionally like, much more of our budget. And what workers are trying to do is work across departments to, like, spread that energy over more departments that are community-serving, not the police.

[We want to spread that] philosophy, and power of like what happens when union members and community members work together to push for a redistribution of the budget money that we have. Over the pandemic when all the health and safety emergencies were going on, we actually started a Facebook group modeled after a group called like emergency safety worker response pandemic- a Facebook group that had like 10,000 people in it where everyone was sharing across sectors about what they were doing to organize around health and safety. And we started a Facebook group for all city workers, both non-[union]-represented and represented, and across all district councils and locals. That was an unprecedented way that we had never been able to work together. The way our union is structured is we're all like siloed in different locals. And so that enabled us to identify people in the planning department, the library, Parks and Rec, etc to be pushing together to think differently about the budget, to push for tax the rich legislation, to make our union more democratic.

We're advocating for expanded hours in many places, handicapped accessibility, just like safe buildings in general, and programming. But we can't do any of it without money, you know, like, I really want to push for like a \$25 or \$30/hr minimum wage for all of our workers because our black and brown workers make way less money than everybody else. We're pushing for improve services to the people who actually live in our neighborhoods. And a lot of that intersects with our working conditions, too. If you don't treat your workers well, they're really pissed by the time you get to like someone helping you apply for a library card.

people I was a part of who were acting as a coordinating force. We were doing all the reminder calls, we were booking all of the spaces for our meetings. We were helping to put forward proposals around how to operate. So we had to build trust really quickly. But I think by and large, those tensions were resolved by the fact that people were pretty clear on what needed to happen. We needed to figure out how to get as coordinated as possible across all of the 11 branches to, with one voice, say "these libraries cannot be closed." And we needed to somehow build enough power quickly to stop the mayor from doing this. And I think people were kind of open to anything. Let's put everything on the table because we have limited time. It was all happening really quickly.

BB- In a time like this, I don't think we had no time to be disagreeable. We were all in the same (fight)- trying to save these 11 libraries, and we came together. And we work together. And that's how we did what we did, because we all had to be on the same page. We already had strife already, with that Nutter deciding to close up these 11 libraries. We already was angry already. We don't need to come together and be angry too. So we had to come together and make it happen. And that's what we did.

KCL- Anyway, over time I think, people, we got really tight, honestly. Like, you know, I mean, I see people now and I immediately go right back to those times- and I see people everywhere around the city, because people [came] from everywhere. You know, I mean, the next place I lived, it was literally like with somebody who I met through the Coalition to Save the Libraries.

The mistake that Mayor Nutter made was that he totally underestimated the power of libraries to bring so many different people together. Because it didn't matter who you talked to- there were just so few people who were supportive of this idea (of closing the libraries). I mean, it got to the point where, like, people wouldn't really tell you if they were supportive of the idea because it was so unpopular. Everybody was distraught that anybody would consider closing a library. And it was for so many different reasons. There were people coming there from an education perspective. There were people coming there from a youth development perspective, from just like a safety perspective, from, you know, a let's-get-people-jobs perspective. Let's have safe places to stay. Let's have healthy places where people can get access to air conditioning. There's so many more- access to technology.... Everybody's mind expanded. Everybody was coming there for different reasons, but they just overlapped and gelled. And so when you know, when [the mayor proposes] closing 11 libraries, he's seeing a budget line and we're seeing, you know, like we're seeing this key resource in our community from thousands of perspectives. And nobody was willing to let that go.

BB- We was always protesting. We had to keep it afloat. We had to keep it going. We had to let people know, No, no, you can't do this to us. Especially in black neighborhoods. Come on, y'all. But people really came and rallied around with us. They really did. Yes, yes, yes, yes. Like I said- doctors, lawyers- didn't care what you was. It was all about the library. How can you do this to

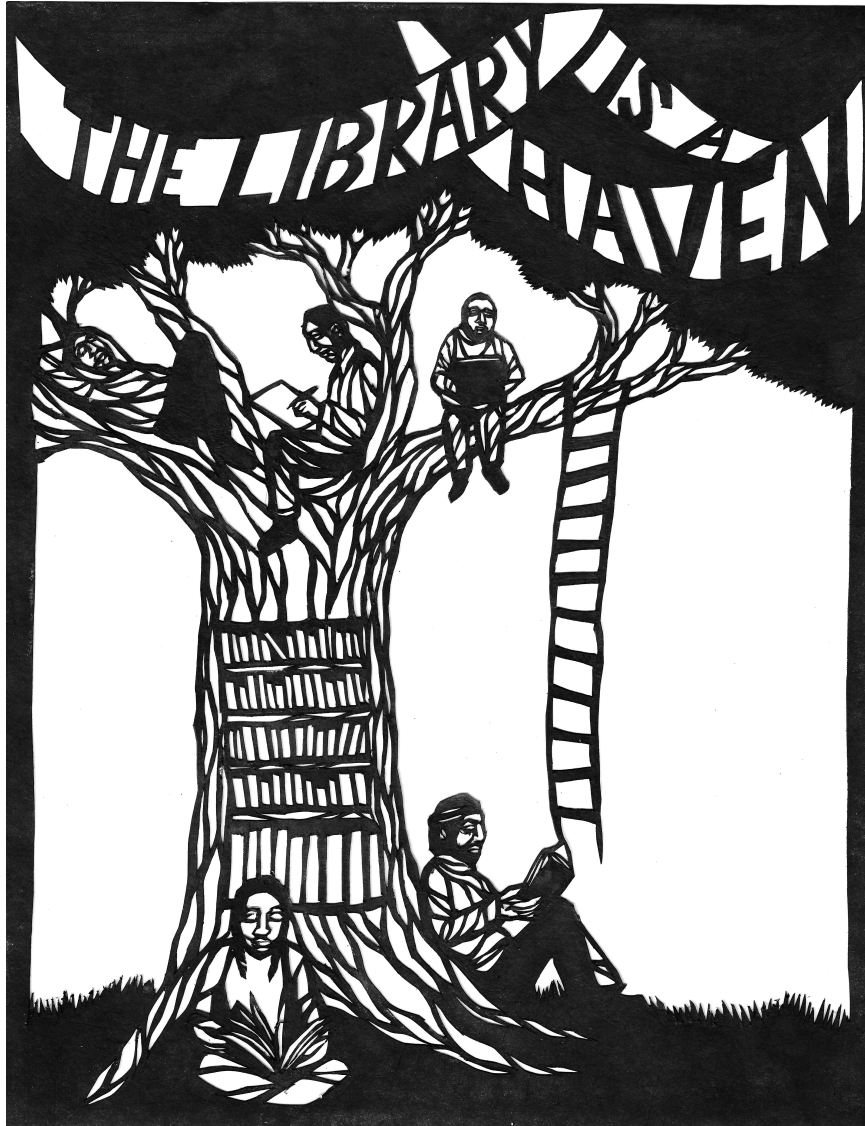


libraries were totally defunded and decimated. At one point we had like \$200 per year per branch for programming like, okay, I guess I'll buy chips or like have one person come in once.

We won city funding for programming for the first time ever and we doubled the money we have towards collections. We got ten times the amount of money in the capital budget last year. We got a smaller, we got basically a commitment to like a two and a half million dollar additional budget in 2019. And then like \$12.5 million over five years, which at the time we were like, okay, not the best, we'll keep pushing. Then the pandemic hit. It got cut. They fired more library workers than any other department because we had so many temporary nonunion workers. We were totally decimated again. We continued to organize through the pandemic. And then because of the foundation we had built in public consciousness and worker and community power, last year's budget, we got \$10 million more in one year. It was crazy. And then they did a mid-year budget transfer of another \$10 million to the capital budget. And then this year we got another \$10 million. During the pandemic, I remember the virtual meeting where Linda was like, you know, we should ask for \$30 Million. And I was like, okay, I will never be in the role of tamping down your demands, unless I think it's like a huge strategic mistake. But like over the last two years, we've gotten an additional \$30 million dollars! And so, like, yeah, the programming money, the collections money, the massive amount of staffing that's coming through finally is like, huge. So now we've started six day service again at ten branches, looking at a massive expansion in what we're able to offer.

We've also built worker power during that time too, because of all the, like, health and safety defense we had to do during the pandemic. It's been this like dual track of worker power and community power. And like, in my opinion, they were interdependent because workers didn't think that they could change anything. And then the community members were like, the spark. When we started to get the budget lifts, it was hard because community workers are still jaded even after we got \$30 million they were like "I'll believe it when I see it." It's March. We got that first \$10 million budget bump last June 30th and it was like a month ago that we started to see hiring actually come through. Because it takes six months to do the hiring.

And then we also were like slowly getting the ability to spend the collections money too. So like I was able to order a shit ton of books. Erica Zurer and the citywide Friends did a fundraiser to raise books specifically for a Black Studies, Black authors collection here at this branch. And they raised \$2500, which again is more than our collections budget for the whole year used to be. So it's like, yeah, they kind of like do the political advocacy and also fundraising. Union members have gotten a lot more prepared to govern, even over the last two years. I've always pushed community and worker governance. When the administration comes with these crazy ideas about how to open for six day service- at first they were going to do it without overtime. Even though they had all this money that they couldn't spend because they didn't hire anybody, we were like, "Well, no one's going to volunteer to have us like a



people? This is an icon for your community, you know?

KCA- It was really a special moment. And that's mostly what I remember. In the structure of the Coalition to Save the Libraries, we really wanted it to be anchored by the leadership of people who were going to be directly affected by the closures at the community level. And so there was an advisory board, that we created, of those folks to be the collective leadership of all of the campaign decisions. We also created work teams. So we were working kind of in a spokes-council model at the time, where there were teams of people that were responsible for outreach and recruitment, press, people who were planning the public actions, the art builds, trying to remember what the other teams were- I think there was a legal team. Our meetings were drawing people from all walks of life in the city, there were people who were activists, there were people who were neighborhood everyday folks, there were lawyers, there were people who had been organizers in community organizations for a long time, there were union members, union leaders. Yeah, it really did draw a lot of support.

KCL- it definitely was my first time fighting for something so big, like I was definitely politicized in that moment in a way I hadn't been before. I don't think I'd ever been a part of a coalition before. I think that was the first time and in some ways it spoiled me because it went better- There weren't a lot of disagreements in the way that I see happening in coalition now. Even though it was an extremely stressful time. Things were happening very fast. Maybe that's the reason why people were putting so much time and energy into every part of it. I used that structure, though, in my organizing in the future where you have like- it's not top down, but it's the spokes where like you have people meeting together and then going out to their communities or their smaller parts of the organization and then bringing information back.

I never thought of this before, but I think maybe it came from that moment. Because that's what we were doing, right? Because we had our own happenings, goings on, our lives in our branches. But we had this living, breathing communication tool of that spoke coming back into the center, bringing information back out, coming back in.

There was like, you know, mutual aid going on. My school was on the verge of closing. We were tiny. We hardly had any money. And like someone had to pay my cell phone bill so that I can then talk to the Associated Press. Like we didn't get paid like the week of Christmas. And like, y'all want me to talk to people. Like that whole week I think I was talking to like the Associated Press like every evening or several evenings or whatever. You know, my cell phone's going to stop working at some point, you know, and like, somebody paid it. And like, made sure that I had food to eat. Well, I mean, for the most part, I was always at a meeting, so I'm sure I was just eating at meetings.

GB- I think it made the Administration take it more seriously. I think initially when we were like, solo- Kingsessing, Kensington, Fishtown, I think that the city administration and library, I think they thought as long as we were like

individuals, they thought they would be able to put the pressure on and you know, what happened was, was that made us become that coalition. And once we became a coalition, and brang in strategies from all over, it became something that overwhelmed the city.

I don't think the city and the mayor's administration wanted to allow people to grow any bigger. I don't think it was about us, as far as they got passionate and wanted to keep the library open. I think that they saw people and groups really forming, and this bond that was starting to, you know, have influence on people.] And people in the immediate area, initially, they too didn't think that, you know, we'd be able to save it. Downtown didn't know that.

KCL- The people who were coming in as organizers who were, you know, from the outside on some level, I think they helped to elevate the conversation, because Philly can be very neighborhood by neighborhood. And we probably would have just fought it on a neighborhood by neighborhood basis. And if that had happened, I mean, just from my experience now, I can see that some might have stayed open and some might have closed. Like Eastwick probably would have been closed. There just weren't as many people. Kingsessing probably would have stayed open. Mantua probably would have closed. Just on the just sheer number of people who were out and about. But then when the conversation gets to be more about the problems with capitalism and who's making decisions about democracy, it just brought in everybody.

3. THE PEOPLE'S COURT

KCA- So, we were trying to navigate this multipronged strategy of the campaign where there was a pretty traditional legal injunction at play. But how could we also bring a community organizing and more participatory grassroots element to what was just a legal fight? And so we were experimenting with that and through the meetings with the Coalition to Save the Libraries, with all the community leaders from all the branches, we were asking: how can we bridge this – these two kinds of tactical approaches? We decided through those conversations to do this People's Court, from what I remember. And so every time there was a hearing inside the City Hall courthouse, outside we would do public actions as a People's Court, to make it all public. We worked with Spiral Q and at the time there was this real reverence for street theater, for puppeteering, for public art infused with public rallying and demonstrations. We built out a bit of a set out of cardboard with the help of Spiral Q. And [we had] signs and all this stuff, where we would hold this participatory "court." And the main messages for that whole process at the time was: these are public community resources that the people of Philadelphia own and it is actually not the mayor's right to take them away. My memory is that the People's Court would always decide that. You know, as we were awaiting the judge's decision about this actual legal process and the injunction inside, there would be an outside strategy happening to generate media attention and grow community involvement at the same time. People

So yeah, we started looking at the numbers and asking people and like we found out the capital budget was like one and a half million dollars per year across 54 libraries and it costs \$600,000 to fix one roof. So like it's pretty obvious that it's funding, but we had to break through the narrative that it wasn't funding and like break through the mayor's narrative. I think it's interesting from my background is that because the libraries are such a beloved community institution and one that is in every single neighborhood, it was a totally different geographical power and institutional power base, really different from building a community organization from scratch. Like all of a sudden, every single city council person is hearing from people in their district about the library. Like if you have five or six or however many community engagement staff at a local organization, you can't do that much cuz you build something from scratch. If you started at the library, you activate Friends groups that have already been existing and all of a sudden you hit the places you can't normally hit, like the far northeast and the far northwest and north central. you can get people moving in a massive group to hit every single city council person. And it's not like you're your normal, like progressive lefties in West Philly- it's like every single young mom and grandma. People are like, "Oh, God, you know Miss Betty and Yvette and Linda are calling me all the time..." And so, it was like, you know, very well-respected members of the community who had a lot of existing power and influence and relationships with their city council people to begin with.

The role of the community organizers was basically to help convene and build political leadership in community members and do budget education because nobody knew how the budget worked. Neither did I. And then do the same thing in parallel for workers and activate workers to be speaking out as well and like sharing their story and talking about how hard their work was and what was happening with so few resources and how dangerous the buildings were. So it was like building a community and worker alliance. So we just started doing tons of budget research and doing the math and then training/co-learning the budget timeline. The library administration starts putting together their budget ask in November-December. They submit it to the mayor like December 28th or January 5th. The mayor spends that time in between then and early March putting together all the requests with the Budget Office. In early March he does the budget address where he puts his first proposal out, and then you go into budget season in earnest where you have all the hearings and the city council people.... And then the budget is finalized and voted on in June. If you start in budget season, you're too late. You need to get the mayor to give you like a high number (in the beginning). Some years if you don't have enough power, his number is the final number. Some years, if you can build enough power like we did in 2019, you can get him to push it higher.

Some context is like the police budget is \$757 million or whatever it is now. All my budget numbers are from like a couple of years ago. Yeah, and the library budget was \$42 million. So like literally, at one point, 20 times that. And then you also have prisons and courts. So we have this massive police apparatus and the community serving departments of Parks and Rec and

COMMUNITY-WORKER ALLIANCES- Kate Goodman, Community Initiative Specialist at Cecil B Moore Library

KG- (The Friends of the Library) is an independent nonprofit. It's members of the community and it's different at every branch, what they focus on. It can look like running programming themselves, it can look like fundraising for things the branch needs for programming and paying facilitators- I've seen them buy crayons and markers or have an ice cream social. in Chestnut Hill, they run an entire independent bookstore. So the things they're able to do is very much an expression of how wealthy and how much administrative training and practice they have. So there's this very huge disparity between what Friends can do in Chestnut Hill and what Friends can do in North Philly. So I was working in North Philly and I was going to ask these people to fundraise for their library. it's insane, unfair and doomed to fail, basically. And also the communities were like actually much more engaged when you talked about organizing than when you talked about fundraising.

There's 54 branches and there's probably not 54 friends groups, but like, there's a lot. They're different at each one. The idea was to build some kind of citywide friends group that could advocate for the things the library needed on the whole. 2008- 2009- was the last time that had happened in a big way. But since then, the Friends had sort of gone through a leadership change and just sort of been all disparate. Linda Colwell-Smith and Yvette Hill Robinson and some other folks came together and started to say well, what is the real problem of why libraries are closing? And we were trying to poke around and like, nobody knew/nobody understood or nobody wanted to share that our budget had been cut by like 25% and our staff had been cut by 25%- basically there was a big cut in 2008 and then it stayed flat, except for inflation. So the mayor was like, "I didn't cut the budget." And it was like \$42 million since 2008. And so we had to totally reframe the narrative around it, like "it actually got cut by 25%." And we've gone from a thousand staff to 700 staff across 54 branches and a huge central library. In 2008, no, they didn't close like ten libraries, but they laid off people or froze hiring so that we were still only at 80% capacity because they were spreading the same amount of staff over that many libraries. So rather than closing 11 (branches), there were rolling closures that were happening and they froze hiring after the recession for a while. So people would retire and they wouldn't fill it in. So like by 2018-19, it looked kind of invisible on paper, but not in people's lived experiences of the branches and in the communities of like libraries just not being functional and yeah, people were like "I just want the library to be open. And the workers were like, "I just want to not, like, work in rat piss." I wasn't there in 2009. It wasn't the same as like the mayor threatens (closure) and everyone organically comes together and the Friends sue the city... It was more of like an intentional building between the community organizers and the Friends to orient ourselves away from local fundraising towards citywide political engagement.

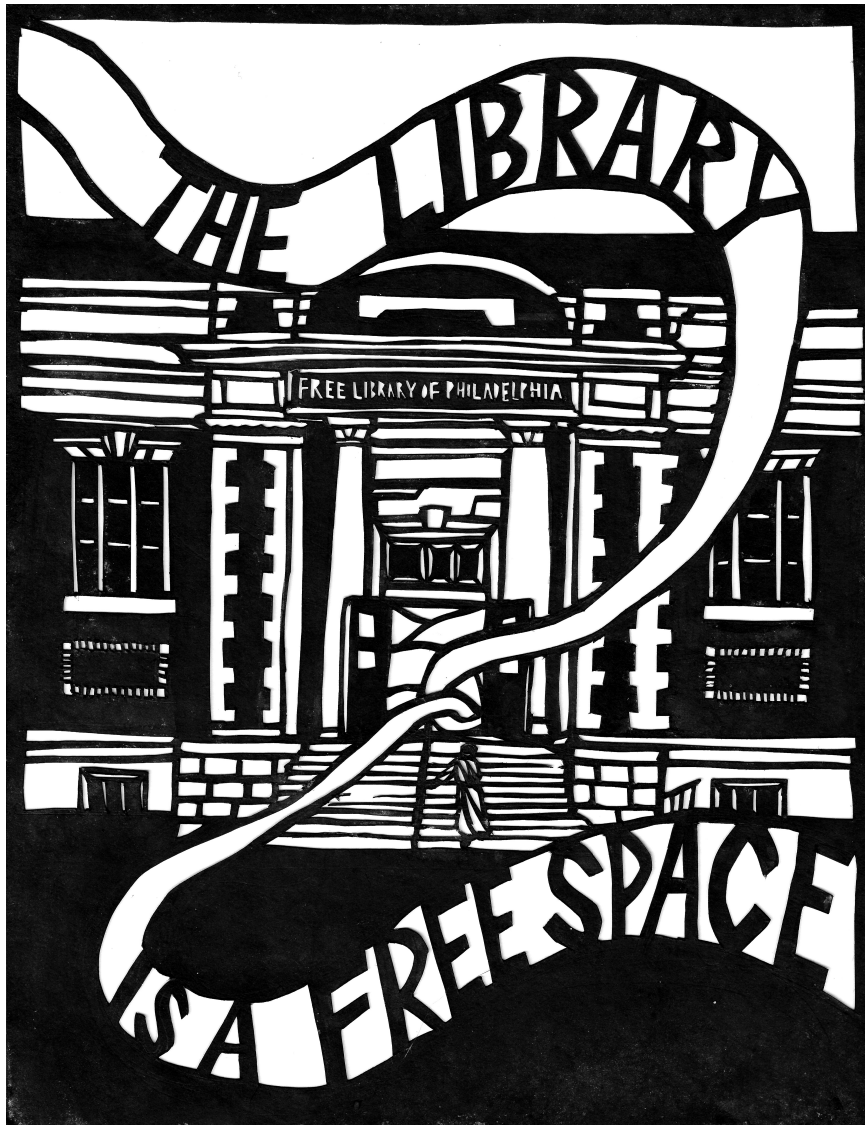
would also be flooding the actual court inside. We did a lot of work to support people to attend the court proceedings inside while we would also do a bit of street theater around our public process outside.

IA- They were able to produce a crowded courtroom. I mean, I didn't have the capacity to make sure of that and not only was it full, it was such a beautiful, beautiful cross-section of the city. It was fantastic. I remember, you know, for example, the Kingessing branch, you'd have, you'd have, you know, the young white anarchists and the black church ladies all together fighting for their branch. It was just such an inspiring thing. And for me as a lawyer, to be standing there in the front with all of those people, standing up for those people and telling their story and telling the judge what a disaster this will be for the city, it was just perfect.

You know there's a theater aspect to this and you want to demonstrate that this isn't just some lawyer's idea of a problem. you know, obviously this was a case that was in the newspapers. It was a concern. But when you fill the courtrooms, you show one, you have the capacity to fill a courtroom. That there's a lot of people that care about this, that's really the thing, people care so much that they're going to like not do whatever they ordinarily are doing and on their free time, show up to a city hall courtroom. It's a very big deal. Even in class actions, you ordinarily don't have filled courtrooms.

KCL- Beyond the Book Walk, the People's Court was, I think, one of the most powerful moments because we had people up in the courtroom and then we also had people outside, right? And I remember this huge indictment that we wrote up- you know, we indict Mayor Nutter. And I think I was like the emcee or something for that, because I remember like reading that, like "we indict you on charges of neglecting children. We indict you!" And I remember people saying later, like, as the court case is going on right at the top of city hall, all you hear is "we indict you! We indict you! We indict you!" It was just like, talk about a people's court, right? You're talking about being stronger than the systems that are often oppressing people. And I think this was absolutely one of those moments where, like what was happening in the minds of the people had more power than the system that often oppresses people. It was the city government itself that was trying to close down these resources that people need. But literally and figuratively, the voices of the people were so loud, so enraged, and so determined that it did not matter what was happening up in that courtroom. The People's Court ruled that day.

IA- This is a two day hearing. The end of the second day, [the judge] says "okay. I'll be right back. I'm going to make my decision." She goes in her chambers and she comes back. And this is how she started, I'll never forget this- "When I was a little girl growing up in South Philly..." And she describes [growing up around] Twelfth and Washington "if someone would have told me that I could just go to the library at Third and Washington, that would have been like telling me to go to another world." And when she said that, it was like, "Whoa, here we go." You know, because she was basically recognizing the absurdity of what the city was arguing, that basically library branches are fungible. You



I think it's why there's no more than just me and my friend is now the Friends group, because most of the people now is gone out of Point Breeze. And [new residents] they see me as a Black person. They don't wanna work with me. Once they see the color of my skin, they don't come back. That's why I can't give up and let the library just close down. So I got to hold on. That's just what happens. I know the deal. Once they see my skin, they ain't coming back no more.

that I continued to be involved in the movement to not only- at this point, the libraries were saved, but to get involved in the budget process, in future budgets.

KCA- For myself as a labor and community organizer, this put me on a trajectory that has charted the course of my life, my life's work and commitments until this day. It was such a beautiful accomplishment. You know, Philadelphia courses through my veins. There's a common sense for the people of Philly, that is like "you can't go up against City hall and it's not even worth trying." And this changed that narrative collectively for the entire city, I think for everyone who was involved, and everyone else who watched the struggle play out on their TVs. Philadelphians at-large were following this story. It created a power shift, at least on a collective consciousness level, for the city. And taking Mayor Nutter down a few notches was a good thing.

Kate Goodman (KG)- I think the strongest part of the people power legacy is the memory of it. "Well, we stopped Mayor Nutter from closing the libraries so we can do this. Remember that massive march that we had? And the successful lawsuit, like that worked. So we can definitely win this too." so like Linda (Caldwell Smith- current head of the Citywide Friends group) would talk about that at least once at all of our meetings. So the memory was there.

GB- Bottom line, with the legacy piece, It'll probably be a fabricated legacy, and until those individuals who are in that library system can honestly say that everything that I'm saying is untrue, which they couldn't. The alternative would have to be them being honest about how Kingsessing library is still there so that we can all just be a part of the legacy, you see. It'd be interesting to ask somebody from the library system "What's the legacy of Kingsessing?" Because what I've seen thus far, it excludes us. Is it accidental? Yeah, that's something to think about. It makes it look like, I have to say, makes it look like white supremacy. At that time, there were very few people of color that was in the conversation for us, on the administration side. I think they really felt like since we didn't play ball with them, that they would take the ball and show that they are the ones who will create the legacy. I just hope and pray that when the (Kingsessing) library opens back up (after current renovations) that its purpose will be to service the community. And the folks that live here, not the folks they wanna bring here.

BB- Well, once we once we saved the library, by me being in charge or whatever, you know, taking the lead role- they made me president of the Friends (of the Queen Memorial Library) group. And I've been there ever since. We have people who come in, everybody's gung ho. But the next two or three meetings, they don't show up. So if they no-show, the Friends Group go down, now what? That's why I said I'm hanging in there. I'm hanging in it for that reason, as long as I can hang in there. I have to because it would be dead. It would be dead. Because nobody knew the the fight that I put in there, and the strength and blood, sweat and tears I put in this to keep his library open and I'd darn sure wouldn't want to see it closed up because of some lack of interest or something.

can go anywhere. Any branch is available to anybody. And she realized that that made no sense, that that's not the reality of the city of Philadelphia, that we have a city of neighborhoods. We had 50 some odd branches and those branches serve a particular neighborhood. And you can't tell the users in that branch that they can go to some other neighborhood and expect that that's just going to happen. Because there are, particularly for children, and this is what she was saying, she was remembering what it was like when she was a little girl, that there are these invisible frontiers.

KCA- How did it feel when the judge actually did rule in our favor? I mean, I remember chills. I remember being in the courtroom, all of us, we packed that final court proceeding where we knew she was going to give her decision. And we all were locking arms, like crying, smiling, dancing. It was very, very, very joyful, very relieving, incredibly celebratory because, you know, we were ready to go into direct action mode if it didn't go that way. I think people were relieved because that was overwhelming for all of us.

KCL- I'm sure I jumped in the air (when news of the court win was announced). I probably called a million other people, and I'm sure we had a meeting soon after that. It was the last second. I mean, our bags were packed to go sleep in Kingsessing branch. I don't know if the city knows that. But like, I mean, the principal and I, who are like literally two thirds of the teachers of our school, we're like, we're going to sleep in Kingsessing! Sleeping bags were ready. And we had a meal plan. We had ways that we were going to get food into (the library). We had people who are ready to cook. So that we could occupy the library and force them not to close it. Like, as soon as I get the call to go, I'm going to Kingsessing. And I didn't know for how long. My guess is that I wasn't with a group of people and that we ended up like calling each other in both disbelief and relief, because I don't think it would be that comfortable to sleep on the library floor.

BB- The last day, we were getting ready to go do civil disobedience. Because some people are getting ready to get locked up. They were going to lay in front of the library and not let them close. When they were getting ready to close them down, they was going to sit in front of the libraries to get arrested or whatever. Because at the last minute, that's when we found out, at the last minute there was a reprieve because we were getting ready, something was getting ready to go down. You ain't coming in here, if you're coming in here, you're going to go lock me up. But we got a reprieve. right before that, they was ready to go. you can't see nobody close no libraries like this.

I'm still fighting now. You know what I mean? Yeah, we still got the budget stuff going on now, trying to get, you know, a reprieve.

BR- it was really interesting because, yeah, I mean, based on the sort of understanding of the sort of bloodless technocratic kind of conception of how governance works, where [the administration could say] "yeah, you can say that all you want. Screw you, we're in charge." But through a combination, I mean, I don't know what it was- there was the lawsuit. There was tons

of public uproar. There were definitely elected folks who I would suspect were going along with it the whole time and then turned against it when they saw how much the public was against it. But for whatever reason, they blinked and pulled back and didn't do it. I'm, you know, used to going to rallies, protests, things where people chant, "We want this thing!" And then it's like, okay, it didn't happen. It's cool that we all say that we want this thing, maybe we got this narrative in the news, I don't want to say that's useless. It's definitely not. But like it was an example of people saying, "You're not going to do this" and then them being right and Nutter being wrong.

I know it's hard not to devolve into like, cliches here, but like, that did seem like people power at a level that I'd not personally witnessed it be as immediately successful like ever, I don't think. Certainly not for something that's a citywide thing rather than a very narrow goal.

BB- It means that people can fight for what they want, because if we had just taken, "oh they're going to close 11 libraries, oh go ahead and do it." No! We fought! People power! People power still is strong to this day. But some way or another, some people now is trying to weaken the people power. People power is still going strong. Yeah, and that's what saved us and that's what's going to save us until we leave this earth. It's still people. You can have all the machines, whatever they want. It's still the people. The people. You can't get around the people. You can try all you want to, but you cannot get around the people.

KCA- You know, I think Philadelphia, when we won, was on the map nationally for like, oh, wow, community power really was able to win here. Massive budget cuts were coming down in every corner of the country at the time.

IA- So the other effect on the city was that it became, number one, it became clear that unlike most city departments, people love the library. People don't love L&I. People don't love the Records Department. People love the libraries. So that makes it kind of unique in the city budget. And the lawsuit kind of made the libraries into a kind of third rail like Social Security is in the federal budget. I think what we established, hopefully, is that you also can't go after the libraries in trying to balance the budget. It's too important to people and people will react. So there's a fear factor that we helped hopefully create. Don't touch. Don't do that again. And that's it. The mayor effectively said that, I'll never do that again.

KCA- I think I will always feel definitively that this was a win. And it was a really noteworthy win to celebrate still to this day. I do know that more materially, we didn't ever fully get that funding back. There were other workarounds that the administration came up with – to keep the libraries open, but to cut resources to the library system overall. That's not lost on me at all. I know that that's true. But when I think in terms of my conditions of satisfaction for why I think it was a win – One is that, at the very end of Mayor Nutter's mayorship, while crying on camera, he said that the one thing that he regrets in his tenure as mayor was having even proposed to close the

libraries. And so the people really did win in that moment. I also think it was a win because we became a national touchstone for how to organize against the austerity measures that were the response to what was happening in the economy across the board. I think it was a win because how often has Philadelphia seen working class communities – that were really genuinely, authentically rooted in the neighborhood-built leadership of everyday people – coordinate a campaign that quickly? Where grassroots leadership was really valued, centered, and most importantly successful? This community-driven organizing victory became a model. And, to this day, I bet most Philadelphians remember the people-power that kept our libraries open

4. THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

KCL- The part that is a little hard still, is that we have underfunded libraries, and that was that we knew that going into this decision to keep them open, that they were then going to underfund them to keep them open. And it was painful. And we were obviously fighting for full funding and they were saying, we don't have the money, it's not going to happen. And we're still struggling with that, right? I mean, for years we had rolling closures, right? Almost like brownouts, where you never knew if your library was going to be open, whether there'd be enough staff to keep everyone safe. That I think is still an issue in some places. That is a legacy that I think we're still living with and still fighting for.

BB- We can never get enough because back in 2009, we lost money and we trying to build that back up and that still ain't gonna be what we started off with. So that's why we rally, trying to build back up what we lost, which is terrible, but we did. Yeah. But being in this position, it has opened doors for me because all I gotta say is "Save the Libraries", "Oh yeah, Oh Yeah, we remember that. We remember that." Everybody know about that, right? All you gotta do is say "Save the Libraries!" "I know, I know, Y'all did good. Y'all did good." And it opens doors too for you, you know?

KCA- You know, you can still bring it up today to someone on the bus in Philly and they will remember and know. And so I do think it has had a real lasting impact. It changed the collective expectations of what could be possible amongst everyday people in Philadelphia. I think that's genuinely true.

GB- The goal was achieved, which was to save the libraries. And once that happened. I came back in the house, just kept operating in my community.

IA- So for me, the case is over with, the branches are saved. City decides not to appeal. And I realized that I had- it was like my wife said, it's like you fell in love. I fell in love with the library. I fell in love with the movement and the libraries. And she said, really, it was like, you know, I was stary eyed. So what I did is I offered to get involved with the Friends of the Free Library, became a board member, ultimately the president. So I got to know these spaces and what they meant for people in the neighborhoods. So it meant